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PIETRO MASCAGNI: AN INQUIRY.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN.

WHATEVER a remoter verdict may determine as to Pietro Mascagni's proper place in the history of musical art, it is impossible to-day to escape the conviction that he is, in a very certain and complete degree, the sheer musician of the theatre—the ideal lyrico-dramatic commentator of Wagner's unrealized dreams. Wherewith I come to a most curious point of comparison.

It is one of the strangest paradoxes in musical history that Wagner, in attempting a concrete embodiment of his ideal of an uncompromisingly subordinate musico-dramatic speech, should have failed as signally as if he had been, instead of the impassioned follower of Gluck and the Florentines, the most abandoned of the Neapolitans. Surely, in the entire range of the arts, there is no case that would seem to make so exquisitely ironic an appeal to the tenderer moods of the Comic Spirit than the amazing spectacle of Wagner the dramatic poet, Wagner the regenerator of the *dramma per musica*, the relentless antagonist of opera for music's sake, producing lyric plays in which the music overshadows the drama as the "Hamlet" of Shakespeare overshadows the "Hamlet" of Tchaikowsky. Wagner, primarily and fundamentally a musical artist, a weaver of tonal spells, must inevitably have defeated his own ends when he undertook to realize his—for him—unattainable ideal of a lyrical drama in which the music should be merely accessory and contributive. It was not that he fell short, but that he went too far: he should have stopped—as Mascagni stops—at mere intensification. He wrote for his dramas, instead of music that should have been simply supplemental and significant, music that is, in and of itself, so superlative, so engrossing, so stupendous and exigent in its beauty, that it becomes the overwhelmingly dominant and essen-

tial factor. "Tristan und Isolde" is, as Mr. Ernest Newman has remarked, "not so much an opera, as a symphonic poem to which words have sometimes been added, by hook or by crook."

It was a glorious, a triumphant, failure—but a failure, nevertheless, if he were to stand or fall by his purpose rather than by his achievement; and where Wagner, in his "Tristan" and "Meistersinger" and "Parsifal," fails, Mascagni, in (say) his "Cavalleria Rusticana," transcendently succeeds. "Cavalleria" is the essential, the ideal music-drama—the perfect consummation and fulfilment of Wagner's conception of a drama vitalized and emotionally quickened by a co-operative, but subsidiary, musical accompaniment. Here is no absorbingly gorgeous fabric of musical investiture to divert the attention and the imagination from the immediate concerns of the drama itself. The music throughout is unswervingly attendant upon the dramatic action. It is invariably subservient and reflective; never for a moment does it assert itself beyond the limits imposed by its proper function of simply heightening and intensifying the emotional appeal of the play. It fulfils, with absolute fidelity, Wagner's precept that the auditor should be aware of the music only as an enforcement and intensification of the dramatic moment. Here it is precisely that: the naked, the sheer equivalent of the inner and the external movement of the tragedy. That, beyond question, is its excelling virtue: its perfect co-ordination of the action and the tone—its admirable singleness of purpose and of effect. In that, it is an indubitably superb and unsurpassable achievement. The music, *quâ* music, has nothing of that tragic beauty which in Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" entrances the sense and "turns the heart to water"; and to call it distinguished, in any merely musical sense, would be grotesquely to pervert the fact. Its melodic vein is predominantly coarse and obvious; its harmonic plan is wantonly uncouth; its musicianship is unimpressive: but, despite its frequent and violent departures from musical rectitude, despite its vulgarity and extravagance and blatant crudity, the score of "Cavalleria" remains a tragic masterpiece, marvellous in its concision, its swiftness, its incomparable dramatic verity.

"Cavalleria," of course, we had known before Mascagni's recent personal invasion of our operatic stage, though his memorably eloquent interpretation of the score revealed unsuspected and ad-

mirable excellences in its structure and effect. But of his other six operas, we have known only "L'Amico Fritz," produced in New York nine years ago—a work highly inconsequential and unrepresentative, and of negligible significance in its relation to the development of Mascagni's artistic personality. The composer's visit, however, calamitous and abortive as it was, has served to disclose aspects of his art at once surprising and delightful. We have heard for the first time, under Mascagni's own impassioned and illuminative direction, his "Zanetto"* and "Iris"; his "Guglielmo Ratcliff," which he had planned also to produce, is still virtually an unknown quantity.

The Mascagni whom we knew—the Mascagni of "Cavalleria"—was a man direct and impetuous of utterance almost to the point of brutality, hot-blooded, vehement, superlatively uncontented. The Mascagni of recent revelation—the Mascagni of "Zanetto" and "Iris"—is an admirable pagan turned would-be mystic, a dreamer of dreams, a seeker after the distinguished phrase and the subtler inspiration: in short, a talent of surpassing virility and exuberance, widened in scope and shaped to a finer utterance, to a maturer and more heedful poise, but still, in its impulses, unregulated and chaotic.

It is extremely fortunate that Mascagni was enabled to produce his "Iris" here, and that we were not under the necessity of basing a judgment of his later work upon "Zanetto" alone. Surely no more anomalous and unaccountable thing exists in music than these mock-mystical vaporings conceived by the brain of the man who has given us "Cavalleria Rusticana." The text is derived by Mascagni's librettists, Signori Targioni-Tozzetti and Menasci, from François Coppée's delightful idyl, "*Le Passant*." Silvia, the charming hostess of a country inn, is become blasé and jaded from a life of much emotional activity. She encounters Zanetto, a roving minstrel, for whom she conceives an ardent passion. Zanetto, also enamored, proffers his devotion; but Silvia, who has meanwhile been made aware of an ultimate and transcendent ideal not to be attained through mere earthly passion, denies her love and his, and sends him from her. And the moral of it all, the libretto naïvely explains, "is that true love is willing to sacrifice itself, in order that its ideal may

* The music of "Zanetto" was performed at one of the Astoria concerts in January, 1898, under the direction of Mr. Seidl.

achieve its high ambition." In itself, the little drama has a singular and haunting charm. There is a noble and penetrating aspiration implicit in its central motive, a high and authentic poetry in its symbolism. It is curiously like, in intention, that other and miraculously lovely spiritual fable, Mr. Yeats's "The Shadowy Waters." Silvia is a feminine and sentimentalized For-gæl, become suddenly aware that

"The love of all under the light of the sun
Is but brief longing, and deceiving hope,
And bodily tenderness,"

and denying Zanetto and his humanly eager passion as For-gæl denies Dectora. Here, obviously, is a conception which it is perhaps unreasonable to suppose that such a musician as Mascagni could ever have comprehended; it is inconceivable that he could ever have realized it musically. Peter Cornelius would have contrived an exquisite setting for such a theme; César Franck, or Debussy, or Vincent D'Indy, might have found for it an adequate musical equivalent. But for Mascagni that feat were impossible. Quintessentially Italian, he is anything but a mystic; his temperament is, in fact, at a further remove from the temperament of the typical mystic, the clairvoyant visionary, than that of almost any composer in the history of music. His art knows no hesitations, no withdrawals into the shadow; whatever of beauty and intensity it owns is of the surface, obvious in the most immediate sense of the word. He is not of that clan who have "turned their longing after the wind and wave of the mind." He is the sheer materialist, untroubled by any too urgent intuitions of the dæmonic, and with no message of any sort—save that of his own gospel of musical beauty—to deliver. Such a temperament, one would have said in advance of the event, could not but be permanently disqualified for the musical expression of such a subject; and so it has proved. The score of "Zanetto" is a miracle of dullness; throughout its dreary length, it contains scarcely a phrase that is not compact of unrelieved platitude. One waits for a passion and a poignancy, a moment of vivifying emotion, that never comes. There is no heightening, no grasp of mood, no distinction of utterance. There is, in short, a complete and lamentable absence of inspiration. It was scarcely to be expected that Mascagni would achieve spiritual intensity, or any

subtlety of interpretation. But here is not even the vividness and the passion of "Cavalleria," nor its eloquent brevity of characterization. "Zanetto" must be—one most sincerely hopes that it is—a mark of the lowest ebb to which it is possible for Mascagni's powers to decline.

"Iris" is in a wholly different case. It justifies, in a measure, the faith in Mascagni's potentialities which "Cavalleria" inspired, and which European judgments of his subsequent performances tended so persistently to discourage. One is scarcely prepared to maintain that in "Iris" he has actually accomplished all that was promised of him under the sway of those unheeded enthusiasms of twelve years ago. But, beyond any question at all, the music of "Iris" is the most brilliant, the most pregnant, the most beautiful and distinguished that we have yet heard from Mascagni. With one's ears haunted by the memory of so nobly beautiful and moving a phrase as Cieco's extremely pathetic "*Dammi il braccio! Una carezza al vecchio Cieco!*" it is difficult to believe that one has been listening to music by the composer of "Zanetto" and—if I may say it—of the "Intermezzo."

As a dramatic text, "Iris," to be quite frank, is preposterous. A tragic action devoid of essential humanity, with no logical organic growth, and crassly melodramatic in its structure, is framed in a setting of Oriental symbolism superficially felt and unintelligently utilized, and bearing merely a decorative relation to the drama. Iris, a young and guileless Japanese, is abducted by an adventurous roué and detained against her will in a resort in the Yoshiwara. Her blind and decrepit father, believing that she has deserted him voluntarily, seeks her out and curses her, flinging mud in her face. Iris, crazed by his imprecations, throws herself from a window into an adjacent sewer, where she is discovered, half-alive, by some wandering rag-pickers. As the sun rises, she expires, and (in the exalted phrase of the libretto) "flowers . . . knot themselves about her, as human arms, and lift her up toward the Azure, the Infinite, and to the Sun." Upon this basis of sheer melodrama and ineffectual allegory, Mascagni has erected a musical structure which is, when one considers the material with which he had to work, surprisingly eloquent. There are moments of labored and abortive ugliness; the psychology is often lacking in acuteness, and the invention not infrequently flags. But, when all has been said that may justly be affirmed in

depreciation, this impassioned and colorful score still remains a remarkable achievement. There are superb passages—the immensely effective introduction, with its climax of vivid orchestral light; Iris's opening solo (if one is not annoyed by a reminder of Wagner's "Tristan"); Cieco's agonized lament, and the conclusion of the first act; Iris's narrative in the second act; Osaka's passionate supplications; Iris's dying soliloquy. Above all—and it is the redeeming trait of Mascagni's artistic character, the palliation for his undeniable faults of over-emphasis, and brutality, and incoherence—there is the constant presence, in this as in his other works, of that "splendid and imperishable excellence" which Mr. Swinburne found to atone for all of Byron's offences and to outweigh all his defects: "the excellence of sincerity and strength." That much, at least, Mascagni's most grudging detractor must concede to him.

At that time, sufficiently remote from the present, when it will be possible and right to attempt a final estimate of Mascagni, I think it will be said of him that he was primarily a worker in the open, going no further than a passionate sincerity and an invincible vitality of purpose could take him,—not caring, in fact, to penetrate very deeply or curiously beneath the human surfaces of life. The events of the psychic world—the world of emotion and desire and passionate conflict—dominate his imagination and completely enchain his spirit. He has not "a far-wandering wing"; nor has he the remotest concern with that other world "on whose leaning brows are mystery and shadow." Not for him the troubled and eager quest of that inexorable ideal which offers "but wind and shadow" for reward in the attainment; nor, for him, the unwearying search for an ultimate beauty, a perfected design and utterance. But whatever virtues inhabit sincerity and truth and power, are his, beyond the possibility of denial. And they are virtues which will carry one far, if not quite to immortality.

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